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Democracies vs. Autocracies: A Climate Policy Showdown

Posted by James Johnson · Environment

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Whilst the Climate Clock in the centre of New York City counts down our remaining [carbon budget](#) set by scientists, the lost irony of capitalist industries and destructive consumerism engulfing the clock continues – but its urgency is overlooked. There's a pressing question that has many heads turning: can our

current political and economic systems rise to the challenge and outpace the ticking clock? Many academics have considered whether [democracy](#) or a more autocratic approach needs to be taken, given this climate deadline.

The Problem at Hand

There are inherent difficulties for democratic systems to meet climate commitments. The United States continues to be one of the [highest emitters of CO₂ per capita](#), and despite some advancement towards the goals of the Paris Agreement, progress is not in line with [targets](#). In a year of elections worldwide, new democratic governments face a choice about what climate action to take, yet their horizons are focused upon [short political election cycles](#). Change can be slow and frustrating in a democratic system given the time for debate and scrutiny, and with the risk that the resulting compromise policies do not deliver the structural wide-ranging changes that science demands.

The concerns highlighted about democratic climate action can be summarised as governments being both slow and undaring. They often shy away from radical policies because of the difficulty of implementing top-down schemes. Once more, the slow speed at which legislation must pass to be effective in law and political compromises results in failure to deliver the far-reaching changes needed at a structural level in the economy and society.

Democracy's Downfall

Some writers suggest that the difficulties with democracy could be overcome with a form of '[eco-authoritarianism](#)' that relies on centralised officials to make the right decisions for the countries and the planet's long-term interests. In a similar approach to a war cabinet's command and control style of governance, officials could make decisions with minimal scrutiny and without securing wider political consent, justified by the long-term benefits of climate action. Such an approach could bring much [faster progress](#) across a range of challenging policy areas such as transport and energy generation. Political leaders would be directed by scientific experts who put more emphasis on the impact of future generations than the interests of current voters and existing economic interests. With a more authoritarian approach structural change could happen much quicker. This would provide expert backing to drive the societal and business changes needed to our economy.

The Challenge of Autocracy

Yet, one key argument by academics against diverging from democratic principles is the inevitable [erosion](#) of free speech and political consent.

Curtailling the freedom of expression of protestors at a time of societal change could also be dangerous, putting the success of the endeavour at risk. Whilst politicians in Westminster are [lobbied](#) by oil and gas companies, they are also swayed by campaigners and public opinion with this freedom to debate and influence shaping policy. In the past two decades, climate protests and environmental NGOs have increased their [impact on national policy](#) strengthening the environmental manifesto commitments of the mainstream parties. By transitioning to autocratic climate governance, policymakers would be locked into policies lacking scrutiny. Even though policy could be more swiftly enacted, it may prove to be less effective in implementation than a policy which had been assessed more widely by politicians, committees, business, campaigners, and the electorate. Authoritarianism does not always work perfectly. Unintended consequences of fast [implementation](#) without consultation demonstrate the trade-off between speed and thoroughness in governance.

A Chinese Perspective

China is widely regarded as an [autocracy](#) where power is concentrated in the president, there is no constitutional limit on the leader's power, and the leadership is not held fully accountable by the people or the press. China is the [world's largest emitter](#) of CO₂, consuming more coal than the rest of the world combined.

However, China has also used its recent [advances in eco-industrialisation](#) to capitalise on green technologies such as electric vehicles and solar panels, highlighting the climate policy paradox of a country that simultaneously operates the largest number of coal plants and holds the world's largest renewable energy capacity.

As a major exporter, China desires stability. For future economic success, it needs trade and environmental sustainability. The Chinese government recognises that it must move with green technologies to spearhead the global race to net zero.

Using autocratic governance to bypass democratic scrutiny, China has been able to undertake green infrastructure projects like [solar and wind farms](#) that now account for two-thirds of the world capacity. They have also advanced their [highspeed rail network](#) going far beyond that of any Western country. Taking the example of the Three Gorges Dam, where at the cost of local biodiversity and

human displacement, the Chinese Government has been able to create 'carbon-free' electricity generation to supply up to [3% of the country's energy demand](#). Large-scale, top-down plans do not always work as smoothly as expected. This has been evidenced by a [Chinese Government initiative](#) to replace coal boilers with greener alternatives that left huge numbers of rural villages without heating in 2017. This created a surge in gas demand in cities, where the new infrastructure and suppliers could not cope. These well-intentioned Chinese political decisions lacked the support of the people affected and the input of business, to make the greener power roll out a success.

The Need for Cooperation

The global nature of climate change and the need for an effective international approach should also be a consideration for policy making. Being democratic in climate governance implies being equally open to international cooperation and dialogue, whilst autocratic states can shy away from forums of global discussion. The four countries yet to ratify the Paris Climate Agreement are [Libya, Iran, Eritrea, and Yemen](#). Many factors such as poverty, war and civil disorder impact these states, but their authoritarian governments also shape their approach and their failure to participate in international climate discourse or to enable citizens to protest and demand change.

Climate change transcends borders, so international cooperation is essential.

All countries no matter their style of governance need to take swift action to mitigate the damage that runaway climate change will cause to our ecosystems and economy. It has been shown in recent years that considerable progress can still be made through democratic debate, and whilst quick decision-making and long-term plans remain necessary, creating a more efficient democratic system will help transform the global economy to prevent ecological collapse. Whether the UK adopts a more autocratic style or continues with a democratic style of climate governance is not the core issue. In the context of our current democratic system, we must find ways to deliver the changes necessary before our time to act runs out and the clock reaches zero.

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